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ABSTRACT

This study examined the evolution of teachers' professional identity as they engaged in the process of becoming teacher researchers. Fifty-four inservice teachers in a master's degree program in educational technology took courses across two consecutive summers and completed an action research project. Data are drawn from e-mail conversations, online chat sessions, video conferencing sessions, and semistructured interviews. The focus is on three of these students whose stories are the most revealing in terms of professional identity development. Two were new teachers, one of whom came to teaching after a career in the military, and the other was a 22-year veteran of teaching. The process of learning to conduct teacher research and the process of taking on an identity as a teacher-researcher caused each teacher to reflect on his or her goals and values. Teachers developed new perceptions of themselves and made productive conclusions about their own work. (SLD)

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"Who am I becoming?" Identity development in becoming a teacher-researcher[1]

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For millennia we have asked these questions: Who am I? How do I see myself? How do others see me? These questions dig at the root of our identity, with answers that shift as we move through contexts, come to hold and relinquish particular goals and values, and operate within and outside of different communities. During a small-group discussion, one of our teacher/participants asked aloud this very question. Was he a teacher? Researcher? A combination of both, yet neither? At that moment, he was genuinely wrestling with an unfolding, shifting identity. The power of his question and the degree to which his feelings were echoed by others in the group drove us to pursue this question: What role might the act of becoming a teacher-research play in the identity development of in-service teachers?

It has become common for practicing teachers to participate in professional development experiences such as advanced certification coursework, master's degree programs, or extended in-service opportunities in which they learn research methodology. Often these experiences are based on models of action research in which teachers learn to systematically inquire into issues of practical significance within their local setting. This action research is gaining popularity and breadth of dissemination. Teachers engaged in the process of action research as well as those who create these experiences (often university personnel), often speak highly of the process citing inquiry as powerful as it leads to improved practice and better student learning. We believe the process of becoming a teacher-researcher is powerful because it challenges teachers core beliefs and values about themselves and the work they do, it forces them to confront who they are as teachers and who they want to be

as professionals, and can lead to shifts in professional identity that are profound and long-lasting. Zeichner and Noffke (1998) report, "Although some attention has been devoted to this personal and often transformative aspect of practitioner research, the impact of such efforts on practitioners' basic belief structures and concepts of self has been largely unexamined in the literature." Responding to this call, it is our intent to contribute to the burgeoning field of research on teacher research through one examination of the evolution of teachers' professional identity as they engage in the process of becoming teacher-researchers.

How do we conceive identity?

Our conception of identity borrows from Lave (1992) and the notion that identities are crafted as a result of the communities in which we participate. Similarly, from Brickhouse et al., "Although the process of identity development is an individual one, it is a process that is socially situated, giving rise to meanings and positionings that are part of the social world" (2000). We believe viewing identity from this perspective resonates particularly well with teachers as, in the words of a participant, "teachers are many things to many different people. A teacher necessarily moves in many contexts and acts in many different roles from teacher, to steering committee member, to parent, to coach..." and in the case of our participants, to student of inquiry. These settings require different identities and a well-developed teacher moves easily between these communities and identities.

If we consider the process of learning to become teacher-researchers as the process of developing identities-in-practice (Lave, 1998) then we must critically examine the communities of practice from which our participants learn. As

instructors, we constantly fought for balance between speaking from our own experiences as professional researchers and our own experiences as teacher-researchers. In other words, the community-of-practice of the professional educational researcher is a very different community than the community of teacher-researchers we worked to create. Tensions between this balance appeared as we discussed questions of validity and reliability, data and evidence, research design and reporting. We engaged our participants in frank conversations regarding their perceptions that educational researchers and teacher-researchers often do not share similar values as evidenced by the research questions that get addressed, data and evidence that get used, and the stance toward any "findings" or results that may emerge from research.

Our participants expressed great initial concern over the potential of entering the practice of professional educational research for the very reasons cited above. As a group their descriptors of educational research included "elite, impractical, inaccessible, and trivial." Participants argued that to continue in this tradition (to enter the existing professional educational researcher community) would be unproductive. Rather, we chose to create new communities of practice - communities of teacher-researchers with more similarly shared values and goals.

Our teacher-researcher community was built on the principles of reflective practice articulated by Dewey (1933), Schon (1983), and Zeichner and Liston (1996). Reflection leads to criticism and change through inquiry and the process of action research. Through thoughtful analysis our participants imagined improvements in their practice and engaged in the process of inquiry centered on problems and questions grounded in what they valued most. The issues of the

professional-researcher vs. teacher-researcher debate fell away and left our participants eager to reflect, inquire, and change.

The research

54 in-service teachers enrolled in a master's degree program in educational technology at a large Midwestern University took courses across two successive summers and completed an action research project during the intervening school year. During the first year students learned about the process of inquiry focusing specifically on the formulation of coherent questions, design of some intervention (if necessary), and avenues for collecting evidence used to answer or refine research questions. We worked to dispel common methodological "mythos" such as "all research is experimental, analysis must involve statistics, and research gives right answers." We worked to portray the process of research as recursive and exploratory while simultaneously we portrayed research as fairly rigid in its demand for logic and clarity. The methodology we taught is of less importance than the process of inquiry itself. To look carefully and to examine critically is the mantra we repeated for our students. The second summer was devoted mostly to analysis of data, constructing a logical argument and presenting that argument to the group.

Efforts were made between summers to maintain a sense of community such as frequent e-mail conversations between students as well as students and instructors, on-line chat sessions, and occasional video conferencing sessions. Data is drawn from each of these sources as well as semi-structured interviews focusing on questions and issues of professional identity.

Identities in action

Although 54 students participated in this research, we focus on the stories of three individuals as their stories are most revealing in terms of professional identity development. These students were chosen to specifically represent common experiences of the whole group. They should not be considered atypical. After introducing each we examine three themes that emerged as shared struggles in the process of identity development within the process of becoming teacher-researchers.

Rich

Rich is retired career-military returned to pursue his passions, teaching and children. Having been a drill instructor and gunnery officer, Rich tended to see the world and himself with amazing clarity. True to military form, he knew who he was, where his place was in the world, and what he had to do to get the job done. As if being a 45-year old new teacher wasn't difficult enough, we asked Rich to challenge several of his core beliefs about himself and his role as an educator. His comments, such as the one that serves as the title to this proposal, are telling and poignant of his struggles with his emerging identity as "more than just a teacher," in his words.

James

James is also a new teacher although without the breadth of Rich's life experiences. A high school science teacher in his 4th year, James explained that he was beginning to find teaching dull and not as exciting as it was when he first began - a feeling recognized by many in the group. He enrolled in our program hoping to be energized, open to new experiences and new perspectives on his role as an educator. Coming to the process of critical reflection and inquiry into

his own practice was empowering for James as he described the whole process as "a transformative experience."

Debbie

Debbie is a 20-year veteran elementary teacher working in a small, rural community. Her multi-age classroom and curriculum keep her pedagogy dynamic and her workload heavy. Debbie came to our program begrudgingly, at the request of her district administrator who hoped to see Debbie move into a leadership role in her school. Debbie openly expressed concern over this thought stating plainly, "My love is with the kids. I don't want to be anything other than a classroom teacher." Soon, however, her identity affiliations began to shift in ways that appealed to her.

Together with their classmates, Rich, James, and Debbie engaged deeply in the process of becoming teacher-researchers. Along the way, their identities shifted and developed, occasionally in unexpected ways. What follows is a description of three themes related to identity that emerged from the experiences of the students as a whole, exemplified by Rich, James, and Debbie in particular.

Becoming a producer of knowledge

Teachers are not typically considered producers of knowledge, in fact, teachers are sometimes considered to be just conduits for the curricular decisions of textbook writers and disciplinary professionals. Paris writes, "teachers have been considered to be consumers of curriculum knowledge, but are not assumed to have the requisite skills to create or critique that knowledge" (1993, pg. 149). Of all our participants, Rich spoke most specifically to this issue, "I spent several years thinking, just give me the book and I'll teach what's in it. The whole process was fairly cut and dry for me. But now, I feel like I can do more than just

spit summarized sound bytes from the book or from other resources, I can actually contribute to the conversations in my discipline through my inquiry. I feel energized to contribute." Before coming to the process of teacher research Rich, as foreshadowed by Paris, did not feel competent to produce knowledge. James made similar comments such as, "I'm interested in the microprocesses of student learning and my research has helped me to learn a great deal about what's going on in my students' heads rather than just take my psychology textbook's word for it."

Becoming a school leader

The process of inquiry put several of our participants at the forefront of critical issues in their school and local contexts. Debbie stated, "I want to become a leader in my school with regards to a switch to block scheduling. I want to be a resource person, someone who others can come to for insight and assistance. My inquiry project has helped me to become that person."

Similarly, Rich spoke of his emergent skills and self-perceptions as a technologist, "My principal wants me to become an innovator in terms of technology application in our school. I'm here because I accepted his challenge."

Becoming a reflective practitioner

Teaching can sometimes be an isolating profession and much has been done to encourage teacher support groups in an effort to revitalize and re-connect vibrant teachers. We found the process of learning to conduct teacher-research and the process of taking on an identity as a teacher-researcher necessitated reflection teacher's perceptions of themselves and their goals and values as teachers. James stated plainly his new-found perceptions of himself, "I used to center classroom problems in students but my research and reflection has

helped me to locate more of the problems in my own pedagogy. Although this was sometimes difficult to face, it was a productive realization."

Conclusions

The personal effects of becoming a teacher-researcher have been partially addressed by Richert (1996) in which several results were noted such as revitalized practice and renewed sense of efficacy. However, our work lends a needed thread to the conversations on practitioner research addressing specific issues related to teachers shifting and developing identity. The three cases and themes we've provided above are radically simplified and summarized results. A more thorough and woven analysis will be provided at the conference.

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